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Autor: Herzog, Stéphane
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Switzerland's salt industry is still state-run

Salt production in Switzerland has to meet all local demand. This commodity, which lies buried in the depths of the earth, has been subject to a monopoly since the 17th century. Switzerland's last surviving mine is a salt mine. Report from Bex Salt Mines.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

The small electric train descends into the ground and rumbles through the tunnels, where there is hardly room to stand. Numbered lamps cast some light along the way, although not enough to tell whether you're going up or down. The wagon finally comes to a halt at an underground station. Our guide tells us that we have climbed about 20 metres over 1.6 kilometres of rail. The people who constructed these tunnels from the 17th century had their reasons for building them this way: "It's better to be going downhill when you're getting the rocks out of the mine," explains

Arnaud Tamborini, operations manager at Bex Salt Mines.

All is calm at the small visitor station at the heart of this mountain. It's 18° C and the relative humidity is 80 percent. Being in the bowels of the earth like this is oppressing and reassuring at the same time. Welcome to Bex Salt Mines, in the canton of Vaud. This is Switzerland's sole salt mine, in a region where there used to be several of them. Back in the day, brine – salt-saturated water – extracted from the rocks used to be placed in large kettles heated by wood fires to extract the precious salt. Bex is also the only mine in Swit-



Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records. **This edition: Switzerland's oldest state monopoly.**

zerland full stop. Each passageway or cavern has its own story to tell. Take the Bouillet well, which was excavated over 26 years to a depth of 200 metres by men equipped with a hammer and knife. They didn't even find any salt at the bottom of it.

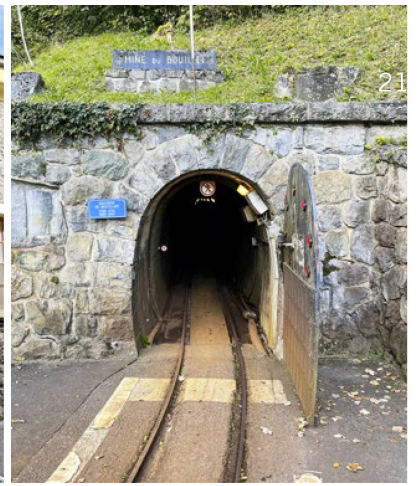
An archaic monopoly?

Who thinks twice about putting salt on their food or on the road? These seemingly banal actions conceal a rich history, as salt was actually a symbol of power for centuries (see box). In fact, the condiment still enjoys a special status in Switzerland.



“Etat de Vaud” (state of Vaud) above the entrance to the storage building in Bex (left). The entrance to the salt mines deep in the mountain is a little more understated (right).

Photos: Stéphane Herzog



The mines at Bex have an air temperature of 18°C and a constant relative humidity of 80 per cent.

Photo: Saline Bex/
Sedrik Nemeth



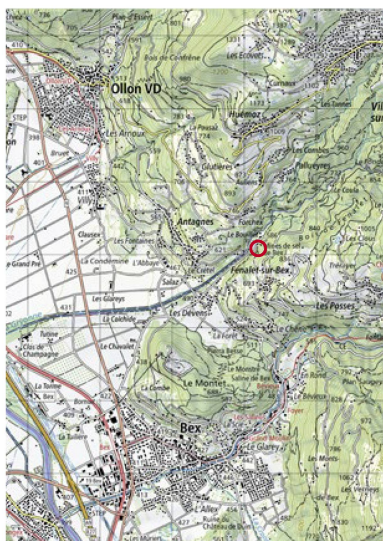
The salt mined at Bex is stored in a wooden, dome-shaped storage facility.

Photo: Stéphane Herzog

Almost all the salt mined every year in the country is for domestic consumption. There are also stringent import controls on salt. Everything, including pricing, is managed by one company: Swiss Saltworks, owned by all the cantons and the Principality of Liechtenstein. An intercantonal convention from 1973 guarantees the supply of salt to every region in Switzerland. This monopoly has created considerable paperwork as it allows the cantons to set salt prices unilaterally and then profit by selling salt to municipalities to grit the roads.

The ‘white gold’ comes from three places: Riburg salt works, located to the east of Basel in the canton of Aargau, Schweizerhalle in the canton of Basel and Bex in Vaud. They produce up to 650,000 tonnes of salt every year. On the Central Plateau, salt lies in subterranean layers 20 to 50 metres thick, 250 metres below ground level. The miners drill into the ground as they do in the Texas oil-

fields. At Bex, however, men work through the tunnels in search of veins. The table salt they are looking for is marketed as a craft product. It can be found in department stores and is known as ‘Sel des Alpes’. “It’s a product with a history behind it and is seen as a premium salt,” states



Situated on the side of the Rhône Valley, Bex is surrounded by wonderful Alpine scenery. The saltwater springs at Bex were actually discovered by goats in the 16th century.

© Swisstopo

Arnaud Tamborini. The marketing is slick. Packets of Sel des Alpes are sold for a few dozen centimes more than the entry-level ‘JuraSel’ salt, produced in Basel. But do the two taste any different? Jura salt from the Rhine is slightly more aggressive on the tip of the tongue, according to the Culinary Heritage of Switzerland. The Bex salt mines have exploited this by producing their own product ‘Fleur des Alpes’, which comes from the mountains. The glacier water that flows there is laden with salt and other minerals. It evaporates in reservoirs. The crystals can then be gathered by hand and spread over larch boards.

Three miners for 15 kilometres of tunnel

The Bex mines have only three miners. That is enough to produce the required output at Bex, which is set up to supply around 30,000 tonnes of salt

a year. The miners drill into the rock up to 800 metres underground. The core samples extracted from the mountain – in 3-metre sections – indicate where the salt deposits are located. “Drilling is our way of finding out about the deposit,” is how Arnaud Tamborini sums it up. A perforated



A salt mine employee inspects the salt, which is still hot after the drying process. Keystone archive, 2010

“When it leaves our premises, the salt sees the light again for the first time in 200 million years.”

Arnaud Tamborini, production manager at Bex



‘Sel des Alpes’ (Salt of the Alps) – provenance is everything in the world of salt. Photo Pascal Wasinger

tube is then inserted into another pipe and placed in the borehole to go up through the vein. Source water is injected at high pressure, which dissolves the white gold, fills the pipe with salt and conveys it to the Bex production site.

Only about 10 percent of the salt output at the Vaud site is for culi-

nary use. The rest is used for gritting roads and for industrial purposes. The factory also has a storage warehouse with a total capacity of 12,000 tonnes: a salt mountain in a hangar. It seems a shame to throw all this salt on the ground. Swiss Saltworks has indicated that production volumes of table salt at Bex should increase in

the future, mainly for exports of the high-quality Sel des Alpes. Looking for salt in the ground is a risky business. Collecting the salt is a noble act. “When it leaves our premises, the salt sees the light again for the first time in 200 million years,” observes the white gold production manager at Bex.

Switzerland’s most ancient monopoly

The Swiss bought salt for cooking from Germany and France from the Middle Ages. Cheeses from Pays d’En-Haut, Gruyère, Emmental and the Alps were transported across the lake to Geneva and then down to Marseille. During the Renaissance, these cheeses were shipped all over the world. In the 17th century, a monopoly was established in the Swiss cantons and all European countries. The salt tax – known as ‘la gabelle’ – was a heavy burden on the people. “It was to combat these abuses from the Ancien Régime that countries decided to take over,” explains Geneva-based historian and economist Dominique Zumkeller. At Bex, saltwater springs were identified by goats. The first mention of these slightly salty waters dates from 1554. In 1685, Berne – an in-

ternational power in those times – bought up all the region’s concessions to ensure its own supply. Bex was the first salt deposit discovered in Switzerland. It was inevitably going to be mined. In the latter half of the 19th century, industrial techniques made Switzerland self-sufficient in salt. Nowadays, the concepts of profitability and sustainable production remain the driving forces for the owners of Bex Salt Mines. Hence the building of a new hydroelectric station on the River Avançon, “which will enable an entirely green production process”, as Arnaud Tamborini is delighted to report. This hydroelectric power will produce all the energy needed to treat the brine via evaporation, a process that requires a lot of heat. The salt monopoly is going nowhere. (SH)